

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 25, 2004

MONTINI ACQUISITION

File No. 03-095

Project Manager: Maxene Spellman

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,250,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District to acquire the 152-acre Montini property in Sonoma County for open space preservation, recreation, and agricultural preservation.

LOCATION: On the northern boundary of the City of Sonoma in southern Sonoma County: 35 acres of the site are within the city limits and the remaining 117 acres are adjacent to the city limits in unincorporated Sonoma County.

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Location Map, Regional Map, Site Map, and Photographs

Exhibit 2: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31164 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one million two hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$1,250,000) to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (“the District”) to acquire a 63-acre portion of the contiguous 152-acre Montini property in Sonoma County, Assessor Parcel Number 127-051-001, as shown on Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds for acquisition, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy all relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to the appraisal, environmental assessments, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions, title reports and documents of title necessary to the acquisition of the Montini property.
2. The District shall pay no more than fair market value for the Montini property as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.

3. The District shall permanently dedicate the portion of the Montini property acquired in fee title (Assessor Parcel Numbers 127-051-001 lower 63 acres, 018-011-015, 018-031-001, 018-071-007, 018-011-015) for open space, viewshed and public access, in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer.
4. The District shall permanently dedicate through a Conservation Easement the portion of the Montini property defined by the upper 53 acres of Assessor Parcel Number 127-051-001, for open space, viewshed and agricultural preservation, in a manner acceptable to the Executive Officer.
5. The District shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining on the Montini property a sign that has been reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code 31160-31164.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$1,250,000 to the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District) toward the acquisition of a 63-acre portion of the 152-acre Montini property. The property is located on the slopes above the northern edge of the City of Sonoma, partly in the City and partly in unincorporated Sonoma County. After two years of negotiations, the District and the owners have agreed on a sales price. By the time of this Conservancy Board meeting it is expected that the District will have entered into a Purchase Agreement with the Montini family. The property consists of a predominantly oak-covered hillside that serves as a visually significant backdrop to the City of Sonoma’s vibrant downtown Plaza. This acquisition is given a high priority because it will protect the scenic backdrop to the City of Sonoma, provide an expansion of existing adjacent recreational opportunities, and preserve one of the few remaining agricultural properties in Sonoma Valley. Staff also prioritizes this acquisition because the Montini property is under threat of development. It is experiencing a tremendous amount of development pressure due to its proximity to downtown Sonoma and the views that extend to the San Francisco Bay. If the property is not purchased by the District, the Montini family will likely sell to another buyer for residential or resort development.

The 152-acre property consists of three contiguous areas, each with a separate disposition plan as follows:

- A 90-acre portion (comprised of the proposed acquisition of the 63-acre parcel and an adjoining 26-acre parcel) adjacent to and on the north side of the Sonoma State Historic Park that will eventually be added to the Park but held by the District in the interim. This portion is currently used for grazing for a family dairy. It would continue to be grazed for a minimum

of three years before being transferred to the California State Department of Parks and Recreation.

- A nine-acre segment with limited habitat value within the city limits that will be held by the City of Sonoma for passive recreational use.
- A 53-acre parcel located at the upper elevations contiguous to the remainder portions proposed for acquisition, that will be retained by the Montini Family subject to a Natural Resource Conservation Easement designed to protect its open space, natural, scenic, and agricultural (grazing) values (see Exhibit 1, Site Map).

The sizable contribution from the Conservancy for the Montini purchase will allow the District to make significant progress in achieving the goals and objectives of the Greenbelt, Natural Resources and Recreation categories of its Acquisition Plan 2000. This will help achieve, among other things, preserving sites with dominant viewsheds and geographic features bordering the city, and giving priority to recreational projects in proximity to urban areas. Indeed, the recreational opportunities created by this project should benefit a large number of people who will be able to easily hike onto the property from the City of Sonoma Plaza (see Exhibit 1 and the "Site Description" section below). According to the Sonoma Valley Visitors Bureau, 100,000 visitors signed the log at its welcome center in the Sonoma Plaza last year. The Bureau estimates that the actual number of visitors is 3 to 4 times that number. Finally, the County of Sonoma also targets this property for preservation. Because of its high visibility, the Montini property is identified as an important Scenic Landscape Unit in the Sonoma County General Plan Open Space Element.

Site Description: The property is comprised of moderately steep slopes rising north from the adjoining Sonoma State Historic Park, rising to 500 feet on the property proposed for acquisition, and 700 feet at the northern boundary of the Conservation Easement parcel. A little over half the property is open grassland and the remainder is covered in oak woodland with large rock outcroppings scattered throughout. Views of San Francisco and San Pablo Bay can be experienced from various locations on the hillside parcel proposed for acquisition.

To the south, the property abuts Sonoma State Historic Park, featuring General Vallejo's home maintained as a museum. Preservation of the Montini property will enhance the experience for the more than 65,000 park visitors per year by maintaining the historic feel; the hillside backdrop proposed for acquisition looks much as it did during General Vallejo's time. This project will further enhance the park experience to provide expansion of existing State Park and city trails. To the east is a city-owned trail that will eventually extend onto the portion of the Montini property proposed for acquisition. This city trail linkage and trail connections from the State Park to the property will enable a hiker starting in the downtown Sonoma Plaza to walk up through the State Park, or around to the trail on the east side, to meadows and oak woodlands on the 90-acre parcel.

Project History: The District receives a limited amount of sales tax each year to purchase easement and fee title of significant properties to meet its objectives. With assistance from the Conservancy and other funding agencies the District is able to stretch its funding capabilities to acquire high priority properties like this one that have recently surfaced in Sonoma County. While this project is now available for acquisition, it came to the District's and the Conservancy's attention two years ago. In mid-2002, Mr. Montini approached the District and the City of Sonoma to indicate his interest in selling fee title to 90 acres owned by the Montini Family Trust and a conservation easement over the 53-acre upper portion of the property. The City subsequently

persuaded the owner to consider selling an additional nine acres on the western side of the family's contiguous ownership, bringing the total for acquisition to 99 acres. At the end of 2002 the District and the City of Sonoma came to the Conservancy with a request for assistance with the acquisition should a purchase price agreeable to all parties be reached. Recently such an agreement was obtained. Conservancy staff and the District agree that this project will significantly further the shared open-space preservation and recreation goals of both organizations.

Based on a good deal of research into the history of the property, the Montini family has filed an application for the County and City to recognize historic lots (Administrative Certificates of Compliance) that would allow greater residential development potential than allowed by zoning and land use designations. The county land use designation is Rural Residential Development allowing the development of one unit on the hillside parcels. The City of Sonoma zoning allows for the development of up to two units on the 26 acres within the City's jurisdiction. If recognized, the historic lots would increase the number of potential residential building sites to three on the hillside parcel and to 11 on the lower 26-acre parcel adjacent to the State Park. All indications are that these historic lots will be recognized, thus increasing the threat of development of the hillside parcels proposed for acquisition.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 1,250,000
Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation	
Open Space District	11,350,000
City of Sonoma	<u>1,000,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$13,600,000

The Conservancy's contribution of \$1,250,000 is expected to come from the Conservancy's FY 02/03 appropriation from the "California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002" (Proposition 40). This proposed authorization is consistent with the funding source because this project would result in the acquisition and protection of land and water resources, and includes a commitment for a matching contribution.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, the Conservancy may award grants to protect natural habitat, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional significance (§31162(b)); and promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes (§31162(d)). This project will protect woodland habitat found on the Montini property. This acquisition will protect the scenic backdrop to the City of Sonoma and scenic vistas seen from many vantage points on the property. This project will make a significant contribution to the county's natural open spaces and recreational opportunities easily accessible to Sonoma City residents and hundreds of thousands of annual visitors to the city.

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 3116(2)(a) and 31163(d) in that: (1) it is consistent with District's Acquisition Plan 2000, the Open Space and Resource Conservation Elements of the 1989 Sonoma County General Plan, and

with the Community Development Element and Environmental Resources Element of the City of Sonoma General Plan in which the Montini property is identified as a top priority for preservation; (2) it serves a regional constituency as a link to the adjoining Sonoma State Historic Park and city trails; (3) the completion of the acquisition will occur in a timely manner since closing of escrow is scheduled for early fall 2004; (4) the property may be lost to higher density development if not acquired for open space preservation; and (5) the proposal includes matching funds from the District at a ratio of over 11 to 1 to Conservancy funds, and from the City of Sonoma at nearly 1 to 1.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of 99 contiguous acres of upland oak woodland and preservation of another contiguous 53 acres in Sonoma County.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in a significant increase in land that will be accessible to the public for recreational purposes.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce, the Sonoma Ecology Center, the Sonoma Trails Committee, the Sonoma League for Historic Preservation, and private citizens. The District has also received a letter from the California State Department of Parks and Recreation expressing an interest in accepting the property into the State Parks system. (See Exhibit 2, Letters of Support)
4. **Location:** The Montini property is located partially within Sonoma County and partially in the City of Sonoma and thus is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This acquisition is accessible by existing roads. Once acquired the property will provide recreational opportunities to the urban population of Sonoma as well as to the over 65,000 visitors to Sonoma State Historic Park and the hundreds of thousands of annual visitors to the City of Sonoma, from the San Francisco Bay region and beyond.
5. **Need:** The District has committed all the funds it can at this time to complete this acquisition while recently completing and planning for other important acquisitions that will help achieve its goal of preserving open space and agriculture, and providing recreational opportunities to urban populations of Sonoma County. The District considers this property to be

the most significant remaining undeveloped land serving an urban area that are currently available in Sonoma County, and the opportunity to secure it could be lost without Conservancy support.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This acquisition will provide recreational opportunities to serve both local residents from Sonoma as well as the 65,000 annual visitors to the adjoining Sonoma State Historic Park and to the hundreds of thousands of visitors to the City of Sonoma from throughout the Bay area. Also, this acquisition will result in the protection of one of the last remaining agricultural properties in Sonoma Valley.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Without this acquisition the owners are likely to obtain County and City recognition of the historic “pueblo” lots which will allow residential development of the property at greater densities than currently allowed by the City and County zoning. This proposed acquisition is probably the only chance to preserve this significant scenic open space and expand the popular Sonoma State Historic Park for future generations.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Acquisition of the Montini property will add 99 acres to state public recreational areas, prevent development of significant open space serving the urban population of the City of Sonoma, protect the scenic backdrop to the City, expand regional and local hiking trails, and protect one of the last grassland agriculture (grazing) properties in the Sonoma Valley region.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** Close of escrow is scheduled for early next fall.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Project History” section above.
15. **Cooperation:** The owner of the Montini property is a willing seller.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This is a transfer of ownership of interest in land to preserve open space and habitat, including acquisition for the preservation of natural conditions and to allow continued agricultural uses. The proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.